

Cultural Values and Learning in Japan

Japanese schools, in an important period of change, are responding both to traditional and to modern influences.

JAPAN is now adjusting to recent, large-scale reforms. The reforms have been instituted in a general cultural climate that is diffused with legacies from a feudalistic and ultra-nationalistic past intermingled with liberal and humanistic influences. During the feudalistic period, social relationships were based on a complex hierarchy. The rule of primogeniture and the priority of male over female prevailed. The code of behavior demanded of the aristocratic class dignity, propriety and self-control; of the populace, piety, deference and respect.

In 1868, the Meiji Government opened Japan's doors to the West and undertook to transform Japan into a modern, industrialized nation. A multi-track, highly centralized school system was set up, in which education was compulsory in the primary school for three and later six years. Beyond the primary level, boys and girls attended separate schools; few girls studied beyond the compulsory level, for it was feared that too much education would make a woman worldly

wise and impair her traditional role in the family.

Many intellectuals embraced western ideas enthusiastically and expounded a liberal and democratic philosophy of education. Traditionalists, alarmed at the trend, succeeded in having the Imperial Rescript for Education issued in 1890. Emphasis was placed upon a form of nationalism, with the Imperial Family at the head; filial piety, duty, respect for law, elders and government became the central themes of moral education in the schools.

Traditional respect for government and high regard for learning carried prestige to the schools and their teachers. Parents contributed heavily to the financial support of the schools. They considered it their duty to support each child throughout all his years of study so he could concentrate upon his important duty—being a student. The student took his work seriously in accordance with a long established concept of success: to do well whatever one is called upon to do.

The glaring defect in education was too close, centralized control, which allowed reactionary leaders to use the schools for their purposes.

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PHOTO COURTESY THE AUTHOR
*Caring for the poultry raised
at school.*

Revolutionary changes in the educational system followed World War II: decentralization, reorganization of educational administration, establishment of a coeducational 6-3-3-4 system with nine years of compulsory education, and re-orientation of the curricula and teaching materials to the goals of democratic education.

As Japan attempts to evolve her educational program within the new framework, she is not without dedicated leaders to whom concepts of democracy are well known. On the other hand, the prewar heritage remains a pervasive influence. In addition, there are problems stemming from the difficulties well-intentioned youth and adults experience in differentiating the superficial and the intrinsic in "the democratic way." Unfortunately, in this crucial period, strife between radicalism and conservatism

tears at the schools. At present, a reactionary trend appears to be gaining momentum.

Administration and Supervision

The Board of Education Law (1948) provided for the establishment of boards of education as autonomous administrative agencies at the prefectural and municipal levels.¹ All but one of the board members were elected by the people. The law was revised in 1956. Today the governor or mayor appoints board members subject to the approval of the popularly elected assembly; prefectural superintendents are appointed by the prefectural board with the approval of the Ministry of Education; municipal superintendents are appointed from members of municipal boards subject to the approval of the prefectural board; responsibility for preparation of the school budget rests with the governor (or mayor).

Members of the professional staff in prefectures and large cities include teacher consultants who supposedly give educational advice and guidance. They work with teacher groups and assist in in-service education programs. In many instances, their supervisory function tends toward the inspectorial.

Parents and the Schools

A phenomenon of recent education is increased parent participation. Parents visit schools frequently; they assist teachers on such occasions as Sports Day, School Exhibition Day, school excursions. Through the PTA, parents study new developments in education, plan health and recreation programs, and arrange to provide such services as constructing swimming pools, serving

¹ A prefecture is a political unit similar to a state.

school lunch, serving tea and refreshments at school festivities and teacher conferences.

The greatest drawback to the functioning of PTA's is the necessity for devoting much time and energy to fundraising campaigns. In 1956 parents contributed about one-third of the total per-pupil cost for elementary and lower secondary education and over 50 percent at the upper secondary level.

Most parents take a vital interest in their schools and have great confidence in teachers, to whom they turn for help in solving problems of child behavior and juvenile delinquency.

Teacher in the Public Schools

Though some Japanese say the tendency is weakening, teachers of the writer's acquaintance look upon their work as a trust and a significant social

contribution. Though overburdened with classes which exceed the standards in size (40 for the kindergarten and upper secondary and 50 for the elementary and lower secondary), they work long and diligently. One teacher, in addition to his regular class work, guides school sports and club activities, takes children on walks and picnics, instructs them in swimming and skiing, organizes and guides their summer "Children's Neighborhood Association," takes his turn guarding the school building at night, teaches at in-service educational meetings, and works with home and PTA to see that children are kept away from "harmful publications and movies." He is perhaps atypical but all do much more than teach during school hours.

Many teachers stay with one class several years, sometimes throughout the six elementary school grades.

A committee reporting to classmates.



PHOTO COURTESY THE AUTHOR

At levels above the kindergarten, there are more men than women teachers; 54 percent in the elementary schools; 78 percent in the lower secondary schools; and 85 percent in the upper secondary. Teachers are paid, for 12 months a year, a salary that "is comparable to that of business employees and higher than that of employees in regular government services."² The basic salary at compulsory school levels starts at 9800 yen a month for a teacher with a bachelor's degree; after ten years it reaches 19,300 yen; the maximum is 41,700 yen.³ Allowances of various sorts add about 20 percent to the basic salary: family allowances, semiannual bonuses, allowances for teaching in cold and/or remote areas, cost-of-living allowances, and day and night duty allowances. Some school boards grant travel and lodging allowances.

From the Public School Mutual Aid Association, to which they contribute, teachers receive full payment of medical expenses, half-payment of dependents' medical expenses, and low fees at inns operated at resorts by the Association. Those suffering from tuberculosis are granted full salary for as long as two years; for other illnesses they receive up to 80 percent of their regular pay. Maternity leave of 12 weeks is granted. All teachers are covered by a pension plan to which they contribute.

Teachers' organizations are of two kinds: professional in each study area; and a labor union, through which they also study professional problems. By law, the Teachers' Union is authorized to negotiate with municipal and prefectural authorities concerning salaries, working hours, and other labor problems.

² Ministry of Education. *Education in Japan*. Tokyo: The Ministry, 1956. p. 73.

³ 360 yen are equivalent to one U. S. dollar.

Children and Youth in School

Teachers are sorely needed, for schools are crowded with children and youth. Except for those excused because of illness, some physical defects, or severe mental retardation, all children of compulsory school age are enrolled in regular or special schools.⁴ Over half those of upper secondary school age attend full-time or part-time schools. More would attend if there were schools in their area, if they were financially able, or if they were able to pass the prefectural examinations. Over 20 percent of the upper secondary school graduates attend colleges or universities; many others attend junior colleges or miscellaneous schools. Among university students are an increasing number of girls. Many youths who aspire to attend universities fail to pass the entrance examinations. In 1955, for instance, only 20.7 percent of those who applied were admitted.

Most children attend school from Monday through Saturday noon; a few, from Monday through Friday.⁵ They have three major vacations in addition to nine national holidays: six weeks in summer, two before and after the New Year, and two following the close of the school year in March.⁶

Curricula are much like those in the U.S.A. In the elementary school children study Japanese language, mathematics, science, social studies, music, drawing, physical education, and, in the

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⁴ Schools for the blind, deaf, and otherwise physically handicapped.

⁵ During the Occupation, a five-day week was introduced to provide time for in-service education; its popularity decreases yearly.

⁶ Limited attendance is required during the summer for "Children's Association" meetings. Some city schools have open-air summer schools, usually at the seashore.

major focus in this proposal is on curriculum improvement to achieve a balanced program.

As ASCD moves ahead with an action program in this problem area, the kinds of issues identified in the original proposal for CAPCI should begin to be resolved. Three such issues, readers may recall, are: (a) In what curriculum areas should all children and youth have experience? How much experience, in terms of years and percentage of time in school? (b) What curriculum areas should be considered as specialized education, for limited participation at some or all levels? On what criteria should the participation (or choice) in these areas be decided? (c) Can better balance in the curriculum be provided by such means as variable class size, different lengths of class periods and of the school day, television courses, summer school programs, and other administrative adaptations?

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Learning in Japan

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fifth and sixth grades, homemaking. In addition they have "extracurricular" activities in science, music, art, or sports (especially baseball). Similar subjects are required in the lower secondary schools; vocational subjects, homemaking and a foreign language are elective. Large numbers of students elect English.

Music, primarily western, and art are taught in *every* Japanese school. No one regards these areas as frills. The high value placed upon the arts may stem from a time honored philosophy which, according to Sano, "required the culti-

vation of an art of quiet but deep appreciation for all the good and the beautiful in the natural and human environment. . . . One's ability and talent, according to this view, were a trust from Heaven, to the development of which one must devote one's relentless efforts."⁷ At any rate, on holidays and Sundays, children of all ages can be seen outdoors drawing and painting. Lower and upper secondary school pupils, with scores in hand, flock to symphony concerts, ballets, and operas.

Teaching methods and curricular organizations are as varied as in this country. Unit study is common in correlated or fused programs, though many teachers encounter difficulties because of the large numbers of pupils in their classes. Audio-visual aids, both teacher- and pupil-made, as well as commercial aids, are used throughout the country. Many schools are now using TV as a resource for learning.

In the future, as in the past, the Japanese people will expect their schools to provide an educated citizenry. Modifications in the educational program will occur, as educators go on learning from their own and others' experiences. Change, however, will follow a complex pattern; for, as Sano notes:

. . . the Japanese will be induced to discard their historical heritage only when it is absolutely necessary for survival, for they are the people noted for setting store by anything that bears the mark of age. At the same time, they are not without an intense curiosity for the new. Their propensity for experimentation . . . has repeatedly saved their culture from stagnation in spite of their strong attachment to their past."

⁷ Chiyeko Sano. *Changing Values of the Japanese Family*. Dissertation. Washington, D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1958.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

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